

Research Papers

Rethinking the Ying Fo Fui Kun Cemetery, Singapore

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Paper 1

The Interconnected Politics of Death and Land in Singapore

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Ying Fo Fui Kun
Cemetery

Site introduction

Located along Commonwealth Avenue, the Ying Fo Fui Kun Cemetery strikes one as an oddity in the centre of a public housing estate. (Fig. 1; Fig. 2) Measuring at 1.89 hectares of land, the site holds about 2700 tombstones, an ancestral hall and a memorial hall, flanked on two sides by towering post-modern housing blocks. These residences, in fact, stand on land that used to belong to the cemetery. In 1822, the Hakka clan association, Ying Fo Fui Kun, had bought over 40 hectares of land to house both their living community and their dead. Naming their land Shuang Long Shan (双龙山) or Double Dragon Hill, the area was so chosen because it contained two hills, and the Chinese believed the building of cemeteries on top of hills was particularly auspicious. But in 1969, most of this land was acquired by the state for redevelopment, the hills flattened, with the association wrestling back a small portion for themselves, albeit with a 99-year lease tacked onto its lifespan. Though the clan still has about 50 more years to hold onto this land, it has initiated talks of redevelopment itself, expressing a desire to, “serve our members and the community, and blend in better with the surrounding physical environment.”¹

The History of Clan Associations

The narrative surrounding the cemetery and the tussle for land goes beyond the rhetoric of land scarcity in Singapore. At the heart of the discussion lies the question of identity - what it means to be Chinese in Singapore, and how the living relate to the dead, their ancestors, both in the rituals they practise and how they share space between them.

The situation that the Ying Fo Fui Kun finds itself in – an odd relic increasingly edged out by modern Singapore – is typical of the various clan associations in the country. This is in part because clan associations were established in pre-colonial Singapore, as a way for the Chinese society to organise and govern itself within British colonial rule. As immigrants largely from various territories in China, “dialect differences and unintelligibility” created separations most commonly along dialect lines and regional affinity, with the resultant associations catering to the spiritual, economic and social welfare of their own communities.² Amongst other things, these associations built temples, ancestral halls and cemeteries, so that incoming migrants could thank their deities or forefathers upon safe arrival after a harsh voyage, or a place for burial if they did not. Economically, these places were also a form of revenue – either from donations at the temple, or fee collections at the cemetery.³

¹ Zaccheus, 2014.

² Cheng, 1995: 478

³ *Ibid.* 483.



Fig. 2: Site Images

The New Narrative of Nationalism

The independence of Singapore and the establishment of a new government thus introduced a different political situation that these clan associations had to adapt to. Under colonial rule, the associations had positioned themselves as the barrier between the Chinese community and outside interference, and were in their own way a means of governance for the Chinese.⁴ Clan associations thus held political power, which the post-independent Singapore government sought to subsume. It was thus politically expedient for the new government to dismantle existing ascriptive ties between the Chinese and the associations they had pledged allegiance to, and instead replace them with “social relationships that derived their meaning from the nation-state framework”.⁵

To do this, the incumbent government has implemented two key policies to foster nationalism and restrict the influence of ethnic-based organisations; these are:

1. No new societies or associations could be registered on racial or ethnic lines with effect from 1969.
2. The active promotion of a new network of inter-racial community organizations under the direction of the government's People's Association (PA) and the Prime Minister's Office (PMO).⁶

Thus, the purpose of clan associations has become increasingly replaced by state-sponsored organisations and initiatives, such as community centres (typically established together with public housing estates), trade unions, government grassroots organizations and voluntary associations like the YMCA and the Red Cross.⁷ Most significantly, these post-independent initiatives are intended to be ethnically-neutral, catering to the new ethnically diverse Singapore society, and inadvertently highlighting how ideologically at odds the existence of traditional Chinese associations are with notions of nationalism and collective identity. Clan associations were premised on exclusivity, but as immigrants became citizens, clan associations have had to reposition themselves within the new narrative of an inclusive nation.

⁴ Tan, 1985: 68.

⁵ Tan and Yeoh, 1995: 186.

⁶ Tan, 1995: 69.

⁷ *Ibid.* 70-71.

A Different 'Chinese'

At the same time, while the Chinese in the past distinguished themselves along dialect type, the Singaporean Chinese today has become homogenized to first identify with the Mandarin language, if they speak some form of Chinese at all. The use of dialect has severely declined: between 2000 and 2010, the use of Mandarin at home rose from 45.1% to 47.7%, while dialect-usage dropped from 30.7% to 19.25, a decline that was offset by an 8.7% increase in the use of English at home (from 23.9% to 32.6%). Researchers further note that since English has become the *lingua franca* of the Singapore community, it is unlikely that these trends in language will be reversed.⁸ The understanding of 'Chinese-ness' has perhaps become diluted, disassociated from dialect, and in some cases where Singaporean Chinese no longer speak any form of Mandarin, increasingly ethnically neutral. This endangers not just the existence of dialect, but also the clan associations that have typically identified themselves through these dialects.

Furthermore, these associations have to increasingly contend with a new generation of Chinese who are born into a Singapore citizenship, never had to consider themselves foreigners in a new land and do not require the assistance or community support these associations traditionally provided. Thus while the number of clan associations has declined, membership strength has paralleled its fall with the modal age of members steadily increasing. Clan associations find themselves trapped in a double-bind situation, where the struggle of reinvention in the form of open membership recruitment confronts the very basis of their foundation, while a refusal to change not only seals their demise, but forces them to remain ideologically opposed to the ideals of the nation-state.

The Primacy of the Cemetery: the exchange between the dead and the living

More significantly, state efforts have targeted not just the existence of clan associations, but the land they own, and in particular, the cemeteries they have laid claim to. In *The Politics of Space: Changing Discourses on Chinese Burial Grounds in Post-war Singapore*, Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Tan Boon Hui write, "In their attempts to forge a new nation-state, Singapore's leaders had to fundamentally reshape, *inter alia*, the "primacy of places" in people's consciousness and in turn replace it by "an abstractly conceptualized and much less immediate linkage with a generalized area", in this case, a "nation" defined by political and territorial boundaries."⁹

⁸ Cheng Lian Pang, 2015: xxi.

⁹ Tan and Yeoh, 1995: 186.

The Chinese cemetery is one such significant place. Symbolically, the Chinese cemetery physicalizes the relationship between the living and dead, and by proxy the clan they belong to. Chinese culture emphasizes ancestor worship, believing that proper treatment of the dead would in turn ensure a life of blessings for the dead's descendants. The practice of burial and death rituals, centred on the ancestral altar and the grave, thus exemplify "the idea of continuity of kinship beyond death and the notion of exchange between the living and the dead."¹⁰

Territorially, the Chinese cemetery is a means of staking out one's claims on a landscape by placing the remains of one's ancestors in it. A form of "ritual territoriality", the impetus is thus to enlarge the space used by the cemetery as a visual marker and a tool of power, rather than to condense it.¹¹ Ample space is further required for the practice of rituals, while Chinese geomantic principles, or *feng shui*, privileged locations with running water, copses or ravines, ideally near hill-tops as the favoured sites for burial.¹² The location of each grave in the cemetery has thus undergone a process of careful selection, although the end result might make the cemetery seem disordered, and worse, in the eyes of the government, a serious "threat to the economics of space management".¹³

Spatialized Policy: From Coffin to Urn

The move from coffin to cremation, as the encouraged method of burial, thus significantly interferes with the Chinese consciousness of death. Most notably, as written by Lily Kong in *No Place, New Places: Death and its Rituals in Urban Asia*, "the deceased no longer rests with other family, community or clan members, but with complete strangers"¹⁴. Cremation removes the body from its relationship with the earth, while the rows of urns arranged in blocks, strangers 'living' next to strangers, then becomes a neat parallel to the stacks of public housing buildings most Singaporeans had lived their lives in; perhaps a sign of the total imposition of the nation-state ideal of the collective – from life until death. More importantly, this effectively severs the ties of people to land through their buried ancestors. Sacred space and sacred time become reconceptualised¹⁵, with the state successfully influencing "the *places and spaces* of Singaporean Chinese-ness" in order to reshape ethnic identity¹⁶; land becomes truly public, owned by no one body or organisation, except save for perhaps the government.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 187.

¹¹ Kong, 2012: 417.

¹² Tan and Yeoh, 1995: 188.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Kong, 2012: 417-418.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 418.

¹⁶ Heng, 2015: 58.

The shift in social psyche comes at the intersection of another three policy decisions, namely:

1. The 1966 Land Acquisition Act; an Act to provide for the acquisition of land for public and certain other specified purposes.
2. The targeted acquisition of private cemeteries; executed under the Land Acquisition Act, all private cemeteries that have been closed for burial, will be acquired as and when needed for redevelopment.
3. The 1988 New Burial Policy, where the burial plot is leased for a maximum of 15 years, after which the body is exhumed and the graves used for fresh burial. Incidentally, the only cemetery still open for burials is the public Choa Chu Kang Cemetery Complex.

Introduction of Urban planning Ideals

With this, the state is then able to insert its own planning ideals as a new layer over the landscape, effectively smothering and altering the previous topography. Much of Singapore's post-independence urban planning vocabulary borrows heavily from British town planning (ironically), such as the use of a master development plan and the introduction of new town development.¹⁷ The initial absorption of the Ying Fo Fui Kun cemetery in 1969 was part of the latter, where it and its neighbouring lands was seen as "a logical extension of the Queenstown development"^{18 19}.

The superimposition of the new town plan reinforced the mass housing model, as originally pioneered by CIAM, and further introduced new understandings of public space. The ground floor of the public housing blocks, termed as 'void decks' in Singapore, was kept deliberately empty to serve as a gathering-place or an opportunity for chance encounters between residents. Much thought was also given to the spaces between the blocks, with the blocks grouped as clusters around a node, typically an estate facility such as a playground or small square. Here, the design intention of these new towns emphasised smaller enclosures, avoiding large empty expanses between buildings. More important, though, was the idea that the space a resident moved through upon leaving his unit could be controlled, via a hierarchy of spaces, from the corridor to the lift lobby, the descent to the void deck, linked to routes that channelled one through or past the various nodes before reaching the town centre.²⁰

¹⁷ Yuen, 2011: 148.

¹⁸ Convened in 1953, Queenstown is Singapore's first new town development; it was designed as a model satellite town: self-sufficient, containing housing, recreational, commercial facilities and more.

¹⁹ Kong and Yeoh, 2003: 69.

²⁰ Hee and Giok, 2003: 90-91.

The Dead are difficult to control

The narrative of the landscape thus changes to prioritise the living, but designed in a way to move one between planned architectural nodes that rest only on the landscape's surface; the playground, for instance, or the pervasion of the high-rise, which removes one from the surface entirely. One's relationship with and understanding of the earth becomes further weakened, and any trace that the land used to house the dead becomes further buried.

And yet, full state control over matters of the dead remain elusive. Though the Chinese practice of burial was not immutable to a state-imposed discourse, its realm of the sacred and spiritual - "the politics of death" - nevertheless lends some resistance against and cannot be fully controlled by "the politics of life"²¹. Burial practices are, after all, situated within the discourse of the "sacred" and ancestor worship, and governed by principles of geomancy that allows itself to be placed outside of the logic of rational urban planning,

The Ying Fo Fui Kun's ability to wrestle back some portion of their land is testament to this. At the time of acquisition, the association had strongly objected to the compulsory acquisition of their only cemetery, but recognising the importance of redevelopment for the nation's progress, requested for several concessions in lieu of the acquisition, such as a license for another burial ground, a portion of the existing burial ground to be kept to re-house their ancestors, and for the existing temple on the grounds be kept. These arguments were made on the premise that, according to the association, their members would object to re-burial at the Chua Chu Kang government cemetery and would not like to see their only cemetery "extinguished". Though a new burial ground was not granted, the state acceded to the last two requests, acknowledging that the Hakka people had "no other cemetery."²²

The presence of the last bit of cemetery at Commonwealth thus marks out a symbolically-charged topography that ties the dead to the living, as a site of remembrance and reminder that asserts the presence of an older landscape which exists just beneath the urban fabric of the newer housing estate.

²¹ The term "the politics of death" and "the politics of life" are taken from Comaroff, 2007: 65.

²² Tan and Yeoh, 2002:7-8

Ritual, topography, and a new reading of Place

But in the discussion of historical topographies and the coexistence between the worldly and otherworldly, we must return to the discussion of death and burial rituals as another means of reintroducing new readings on existing topography. Here, commemorative rituals, such as those practised during Qing Ming festival and Hungry Ghost Festival²³ become particularly important, as they necessitate the act of moving through and placing objects on physical space, regardless if the land has not been planned as a site for burial or remembrance in the present, thereby overlaying a “ghostly historical topography... on top of the familiar one, a radical disjuncture of memory and topography that is violently, temporarily conflated within the hyper-controlled surfaces of the contemporary city”²⁴. As such, ordinary landscape in everyday life can have their nature altered during these select times, only returning to their typical state when the festivals are over.

The mechanisms used in the rituals, such as itinerant alters, *bai ku qian* (paper effigies of silver and gold) and temporal performances, are further understood in Terence Heng’s study *An Appropriation of Ashes* as “transient aesthetic markers” that allow for “alternative narratives of Chinese ethnic identities” to be performed. (Fig. 3) “Place,” as Heng writes, “is made in the spaces of everyday life. Individuals experience, think of and impose space.”²⁵ These aesthetic markers reintroduce a different narrative of ‘place’ from the actions of the people, and though their transient nature results in fleeting confrontations with normative readings of the same site, the cyclical nature of these festivals ensures that the reinsertion of death returns again and again in a way that is largely beyond state control. While land can be reclaimed, such as the eventual return of the Ying Fo Fui Kun cemetery to the state, these rituals, as Joshua Comaroff describes in *Ghostly Topographies*, invoke “no bodies upon which pressure can be applied, or against which ‘law-preserving’ violence can be threatened.” Here, significantly, it is thus perhaps the rituals that are able to truly define and reclaim a place, rather than any form of permanent, physical demarcation of the land.

²³ Qing Ming Festival, also known as Tomb Sweeping Festival, is a traditional Chinese festival used to honour one’s ancestors; the ancestor’s place of burial is cleaned and offerings are made. The Hungry Ghost Festival marks the date when, according to traditional belief, restless spirits roam the earth. Many Chinese burn offerings during this period to appease both their own ancestors and these transient spirits.

²⁴ Comaroff, 2007: 66.

²⁵ Heng, 2015: 58-59.



Hungry Ghost Festival: A performance to appease wandering ghosts set-up on a temporary stage



Hungry Ghost Festival: A temporary altar set-up in the corridor of a public housing apartment block. The altar will likely be removed after the festival is over.

Conclusion

Perhaps the more significant question, then, would be to ask how the changing context of burial practices in Singapore has affected these rituals and the perception of death and its landscapes in the eyes of today's Singaporeans. The lack of land in Singapore has increasingly resulted in the marginalization of the dead. The dead are truly displaced - the cremated are increasingly stored in concentrated locations (such as the public columbaria at Choa Chu Kang and Mandai) far removed from the everyday life of Singaporeans, the use of cemetery plots has an imposed time-cap due to lack of space, and while the Mandai crematorium is set for expansion to cope with increasing demands for the dead, recent plans that reintroduced a columbarium in a residential estate has met with significant resistance²⁶. Rituals are also changing; more are opting for sea burial, funeral wakes are being shortened and new rituals invented to 'make up' for lost days. In China commemorative rituals have moved into virtual space; acts of remembrance are carried online, a trend that may be adopted by Singapore in just a matter of time.

At the same time, some clan associations have made concerted efforts to reinvent themselves, dispelling predictions that the Chinese clan associations are set on a path of extinction. The Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations (SFCCA) has started to target the youth, regardless if they are able to speak Mandarin,²⁷ while the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan and the Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan has reframed their practices through a focus on charity work, education and cultural and heritage preservation.²⁸

These associations are among "the more economically wealthy and politically connected",²⁹ with stronger membership support. In relation, the Ying Fo Fui Kun does not possess these luxuries, and its ability to reinvent itself is thus more precarious.³⁰ And yet, the Ying Fo Fui Kun can consider the land it has, for however long it owns it, as its strongest bargaining chip. If the clan continues with its current trajectory of existing as it does now on site, the current *status quo* of existing policies for land acquisition and its weak ties to the surrounding community will guarantee its eradication. Instead, the clan could borrow the discourse of the spiritual and sacred again, but this time also establish ties between its land and the neighbourhood.

²⁶ In 2015, a plan to build a temple in Fernvale that housed a columbarium was met with significant protest from home-owners in the area. The plan was eventually scrapped.

²⁷ Leong; 2015.

²⁸ Montsion, 2013: 1495.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Incidentally, the Hakkas have always been a minority amongst the Chinese, with the name 'Hakka' itself originating from the Cantonese dialect, a neat reflection of the influence other dialect groups have over it.

Given the increasing pressures for greater space to house the dead, the Ying Fo Fui Kun could consider using part of its land as an active columbarium open to the public, to recapture the relationship between the dead and the living, but this time tapping on a network of relationships beyond the immediate ties of its own community. The accompanying rituals associated with burial and remembrance would recharge and strengthen the land with meaning, but more significantly, its transient nature gives opportunity for the surrounding community to repurpose the land in absence of the ghostly topography; 'ownership' of the land and the sense of place would then oscillate between the realms of the dead and living, with the site as a potential focal point that stitches its past topography with the imposed urban planning ideal together. Even if this land is eventually reclaimed by the state, the elusive nature of the dead, the inability to fully control the discourse of the sacred, would perhaps allow the nature of the site to exist even after its form has been altered, periodically invoked by the living in rituals to remember the dead.

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Figure 3 | Rituals

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